Understanding China Newsletter
P. O. Box 531
Ann Arbor, Mich. 48107
June 15, 1975

Mr. Irv Drasnin
CBS News
524 West 57 St.
New York, N. Y. 10019

Dear Mr. Drasnin:

I, too, must apologize for not answering your letter sooner. A major research project has taken up the bulk of my time in the past month.

Concerning your potential article for our Newsletter; we are still very interested. We have two specific ideas in mind. The first is the one which we originally wrote you about- the role of the American journalist reporting on China for a diverse public. This could include the particularities of reporting about one sort of social and economic system to another very different society. Or, you might discuss your own ideas on the role and responsibilities of a person in your position. Other areas include what exactly you decide to put in your films, and what you leave out. The Chinese response to you and your work is another theme that could be dealt with. I hope this elucidates the kinds of ideas we had in mind when we first wrote you.

Another possible subject, if you prefer, could be to recount one or more experiences you had while in China that shaped your attitudes towards the Chinese. These could be experiences which you felt, gave you real insight into contemporary Chinese society.

Whichever topic appeals to you more we would hope you might have the time an inclination to write on it.

As to structural details- our next two deadlines are Aug. 1 and Oct. 1. As I mentioned before, lead articles run anywhere from 6-10 double-spaced typewritten pages. Because of financial constraints we must limit you to 2 photographs, which will most certainly be returned to you.

Thanks for your interest. We hope to have an article from you.

Sincerely,

Barbara Haimes

Barbara Haimes
For the Editors

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November 28, 1975

Ms. Barbara Haimes
Understanding China Newsletter
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Dear Ms. Haimes:

Here is the proposed piece we've discussed for the Newsletter.

I'm sorry for running up so close to your deadline. If you're interested in the piece and want to suggest any changes or editing, please let me know. If you use it, I would appreciate a copy of The Newsletter.

If you need any personal data, there is the following:

A staff producer-director-writer at CBS News since 1961. "CBS Reports: Shanghai" was broadcast in March, 1974. "Misunderstanding China", the other documentary I have done on China was broadcast in February, 1972. Other documentaries I have done range in subject matter from health care in America, advertising, and football to the last one, "The Guns of Autumn."

I have an M.A. in East Asian Studies from Harvard (1959) and a B.A., in political science, from U.C.L.A.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Irv Drasnin
Producer

Irv Drasnin
CBS News
35 West 45th Street
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It is written in the book of quotations of Mao Tse-tung:

"A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous."

No doubt that applied to the historical conditions of 1927, when it was written by Mao in his report on the peasant movement in Hunan. It is not quite so true today, in a China where the forces of revolution have advanced from the countryside to the seats of power in Peking. Historical conditions change.

Today, there is no aspect of Chinese life that is excluded from politics and the politics of China is [redacted] revolution; and that includes dinner parties, essays, painting and embroidery.

That does not make the Chinese any less refined, kind, courteous or magnanimous. The Chinese demonstrate to foreigners more than their national quota of such social graces. It does, however, make the task of the American observer in China more complex and often more frustrating than perhaps anywhere else in the world.

It was at a dinner party in Shanghai, in the summer of 1973, that a Chinese host rose to toast a CBS News team that was there to make a television documentary. The toast included the expectation that the film would be "ideologically correct."

The question implicitly raised that evening by the head of Shanghai television went unanswered at the time, but it is one that must inevitably be faced by every American journalist reporting about China.

In turn, it raises other interesting and provocative questions not just for journalists but for all of us. One of them is: How does an American report on China to an American audience?

One thing that becomes obvious to those of us who try is that, by and large, we can't do it in exactly the same way we would gather information and film a report about America.

For the most part, there are no "exclusives" for the American reporter in China. Practically all visitors travel the same roads, hear the same information, see the same -- or at least similar -- places.

The Chinese belief in planning also applies to reporting. In the instance of a documentary film, that often comes close to pre-scripting and often conflicts with our notion of attempting to film spontaneously, of capturing the reality of a time or place as we find it.

But more importantly, the American reporter in China is stretched out between two cultures and between two very different concepts of journalism's role and purpose.

He is faced with a social and political system

that is vastly different from his own; a human experience that remains largely outside the frame of reference of most Americans; a civilization of which the majority of Americans are basically ignorant, or worse, to which Americans bring decades of misconceptions and misinformation if not prejudices about China in general and about Chinese communism in particular.

The problem, then, is one of being a cultural mediator in addition to being a reporter and being both in terms that an American audience will understand and find meaningful.

The American reporter is also faced with carrying out his professional duties as defined by American standards and expectations in a society holding fundamentally different ideas about the journalist's role.

In China, the journalist -- like every other citizen -- serves the state. The Chinese emphasize reporting that sets a good example, that presents object lessons for fulfilling the goals of the revolution, that offer models for the people of

China to learn from and to emulate.

The Chinese journalist must strive to be "ideologically correct." But "socialist realism" often serves reality no better than does "capitalist realism."

It is important to understand and to report the progress and achievements of China, which are considerable, and the objectives of the government and its people. But aspirations alone do not tell us all we need to know about a country and its leadership.

Would it be enough in America to report the passage of civil rights legislation or health care programs and conclude that equal opportunity and adequate medical services exist for all? Is it enough to recite the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and conclude that is all there is to know or understand about contemporary America?

Neither is it enough to recite Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao Tse-tung, or the constitution of The Peoples Republic of China,

and conclude that is all there is to say or know about contemporary Chinese life.

The American reporter does not look only for what is best, or worst, in other societies but for what is true for most people, in most cases. He cannot report models alone. It is not the role of the American journalist to speak for the Chinese government, anymore than it is to speak for his own.

Given the limitations of time -- ten weeks in China, fifty minutes in a television documentary -- there are many difficult choices and agonizing decisions to be made by a broadcast journalist.

In my view of the American audience, and of what it already had seen of China, of first importance was to try to personalize, to humanize the Chinese experience and the lives and views of individual Chinese.

We have, by and large, seen the pictures and

heard the statistics about China's industrial progress, about factories and communes, schools and hospitals. We are far less familiar with and often have only vague and negative assumptions about the lives of the people, the fate of the family and of the individual, and about the motives of Chinese leaders. We do not, most of us, relate to machines and statistics; we relate to people. In every possible instance we thought it important and valuable for Chinese to speak for themselves and we tried to have them do so.

As is also true in his own country, what the reporter sees and hears in China is not always clear. As has been true throughout this century, the many voices heard in America about China can be confusing. However well-intentioned, pressures still exist to view China one-dimensionally, to explain China with a mind to supporting and proving ideological abstractions rather than toward understanding China realistically, in the perspective of its history and of its revolution.

As in the past, there are those who would have us perceive China as a dark, mysterious force to be

distrusted if not feared; or as an enlightened model for mankind to be unquestionably admired. Either way is an attempt to impose a single truth and either way, truth is not served.

I am no apologist for the record of American reporting about China in this century, either by the press, the government or in fiction. It is necessary to be sensitive to the injustices of the past. But it serves neither the present nor the prospects for Sino-American relations to exchange one set of stereotypes -- of the old China -- for another set of stereotypes -- of the new China. Neither has served us well in the past. There is no reason to believe they would do so now.